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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 000040

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SUBJECT: MFA ON JANUARY 4 CHIRAC-MUBARAK DISCUSSIONS ON SYRIA/LEBANON, NEXT STEPS IN UN

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: MFA DAS-equivalent for Egypt/Levant Herve Besancenot previewed the January 4 Mubarak-Chirac working lunch, expected to focus on Syria/Lebanon. Mubarak will brief Chirac on his January 3 discussions in Riyadh, during which the Egyptian president was expected to press King Abdallah to take more conciliatory positions vis-a-vis Damascus. Besancenot described Mubarak as having "no illusions" on Syrian behavior, while remaining worried over prospects for instability in Lebanon and suspicious of U.S. intentions vis-a-vis Syria. Besancenot welcomed former Syrian VP Khaddam's recent statements as advancing UNIIIC efforts and putting pressure back on Damascus, but not offering new information. Besancenot described PM Siniora as in a "disastrous" situation, and noted speculation that recent Riyadh meetings between Sa'ad Hariri and Hizballah/Amal representatives had produced a written accord that important GOL decisions would be made by consensus and that Hizballah is not subject to UNSCR 1559 disarmament provisions -- points opposed by Siniora and others in the GOL majority coalition. Besancenot stressed that the GoF would urge Siniora to seek to keep Hizballah within the GOL, while also encouraging him to remain firm on implementing 1559, which could only be implemented progressively, in the GoF view. Besancenot reviewed a series of policy proposals from French Ambassador to Lebanon Emie which he described as already progressing, including reinforced coordination with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Arab League; urging Mehliis to demand new interviews and issue arrest warrants before his successor takes over; and reactivating the "Larsen track." On the latter point, Besancenot reaffirmed GoF support for a PRST endorsing the latest Larsen report, but stressed that timing should not destabilize Siniora. An Emie proposal for a FM Douste-Blazy visit to Lebanon by February is still under consideration. End summary.

MUBARAK VISIT

2. (C) During a January 3 discussion with poloff, MFA DAS-equivalent for Egypt/Levant previewed President Chirac's January 4 working lunch with Egyptian President Mubarak, which he said would focus entirely on Lebanon/Syria and came at GOE request. Reading from a telegram reporting a pre-visit discussion between GOE Presidential Advisor Soliman Awad and the French Ambassador in Cairo, Besancenot described Mubarak as having "no illusions" about Syrian behavior and supporting assertions by former VP Khaddam that the Hariri assassination could not have taken place without the knowledge of President Asad and FM Shara. At the same time, Mubarak remained very worried about the current situation in Lebanon and its potential to spiral out of control if Shi'a parties withdraw from the GOL, which in turn could lead to the collapse of the Siniora government and new elections. Awad told the GoF that Mubarak views the Saudis as too personally fixated on punishing Syria for the Hariri assassination, given Hariri's special ties to the royal family. The Egyptian leader would therefore urge King Abdallah to adopt a less uncompromising position and focus on potential risks in Lebanon. Besancenot described Mubarak as dismissive of Syria-Lebanon reconciliation efforts led by Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa, but also skeptical of the U.S. "secret agenda" vis-a-vis Syria. On the latter point, Awad reportedly stressed to the GoF that while Egypt, from the outset, had never stopped pushing Syria to cooperate, the GOE did not favor "exclusively American-led" international pressure on Damascus.

3. (C) Besancenot described Mubarak as having a typical "worst case scenario" perspective on Lebanon, similar to the Egyptian leader's analysis of Iraq. Besancenot concluded that the situation in Lebanon was not as bad as Mubarak suggested; the GoF would stress to Mubarak that while maintaining stability is important and the GoF sees no alternative to Bashar, getting to the truth of the Hariri assassination is equally important. Besancenot also speculated that Chirac may use press availability with Mubarak to reaffirm "the Franco-American axis" and international unity in supporting Lebanese independence and sovereignty.

KHADDAM STATEMENTS

14. (C) Besancenot welcomed former VP Khaddam's recent public statements as serving UNIIIC's purposes and reviving pressure against Syria. Though Khaddam's remarks thus far had not revealed new information, the GoF hoped he would talk to UNIIIC soon and reveal more pertinent details. Besancenot quipped that Khaddam's credibility remained questionable, given that he had been a part of what he was now condemning; nevertheless, the importance of statements from such a high-level former regime insider should not be minimized. Asked what may have motivated Khaddam to make a dramatic public break with the SARG, Besancenot speculated that Khaddam could be seeking to settle old scores with Bashar's clan and remained was one of a few former regime figures, like the late SMI Chief Ghazi Kanaan, with potential presidential aspirations. Besancenot expressed hope that Khaddam's revelations would mark the rupture of the code of silence among the SARG "omerta," with more regime insiders starting to speak out publicly. (Note: Former VP Khaddam remains in exile in Paris, with heightened GoF security protection at his residence. The MFA spokesman January 2 issued a public denial of GoF contact with the former Syrian VP. End note.)

WEAKENED SINIORA, CABINET STANDOFF

15. (C) Besancenot described PM Siniora as in a "disastrous" situation, and commented that Nasrallah was effective at changing tactics, depending on the direction of momentum against Syria. Besancenot speculated that Sa'ad Hariri's recent meetings Riyadh with Amal and Hizballah had resulted in a text (which he claimed he had not seen in writing) which reportedly contained 2 key points: 1) agreement that all important GOL decisions should be taken by consensus, and 2) Hizballah/Amal insistence that Hizballah is a Lebanese political component, not an armed group, and therefore not subject to UNSCR 1559. Besancenot stressed that the majority coalition in the GOL had rejected the text, which was not binding on the GOL; Siniora remained adamant that the GoL would decide by consensus "when necessary" without going back on its requests to expand the UNIIIC investigation and have an international tribunal. Besancenot said Siniora was more ambiguous on 1559, and continued to maintain that disarmament would come at the appropriate moment and would take time. Hizballah/Amal had reportedly refused to look at counterproposals from the majority side, leaving the situation at a standstill. The GoF will encourage Siniora not to cut Hizballah loose from the GOL, as it would be difficult for Siniora to ally with Aoun, whom Maronite Patriarch Sfeir totally opposed. Pressed for clarification of the GoF view on Hizballah, Besancenot insisted that the GoF position on UNSCR 1559 had not changed "one iota." The GoF would continue to encourage Siniora to remain firm and implement 1559, but he could not impose it and would have to progressively increase GOL authority in the south.

PROPOSALS FROM FRENCH AMBASSADOR EMIE

16. (C) Besancenot reported that French Ambassador to Beirut Emie recently made a series of policy proposals to Paris (presumably before the December 30 Khaddam "Al Arabiya interview) in the wake of slowing momentum on efforts to pressure Syria: 1) reinforcing coordination with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Arab League to maintain a common front, without which progress was not possible; 2) seeking reassurance from Washington that the U.S. was not pursuing a "secret agreement" with Damascus, as rumored (already resolved in discussions in Washington); 3) urging Mehlis to demand new interviews and issue arrest warrants before his successor takes over; and 4) reactivating the Terje Roed Larsen track, by having Larsen return to the region. Besancenot concluded that there was progress on all the fronts suggested by Emie, with the Egyptians coming to Paris to consult with Chirac, the Khaddam remarks, UNIIIC having asked for interviews with Bashar and Shara, and the U.S. and France in agreement that Larsen should go to Beirut (but not Damascus). When asked, Besancenot confirmed that the GoF still supported a PRST endorsing the Larsen report; the question was timing and avoiding destabilizing Siniora, whose views should be sought before proceeding.

17. (C) A final Emie proposal, not yet approved by the GoF, is for FM Douste-Blazy to visit Lebanon at the end of January. On a related point, Besancenot confirmed that Chirac will travel to Saudi Arabia in March, another occasion to push the Lebanon dossier, though a Chirac visit to Egypt, postponed since last September, remains up in the air.

